

Keeping chickens in the NT



A guide to keeping your chicken flock happy and healthy

The first steps

Chickens make great pets, they are easy to care for and you can look forward to fresh eggs. Like any pet, chickens require careful management to keep them happy and safe. This guide will take you through the key things you need to know about raising chickens in the Northern Territory.

Firstly, you should let your neighbours know if you plan on keeping chickens. You may want to consider:

- **Odour & waste.** Can you position your bird enclosure away from boundary fences, so odour and waste are less likely to impact your neighbours?
- **Noise.** Avoid keeping roosters in suburban areas. They can and will crow all day and every day!
- **Straying animals.** Do you have a secure boundary fence? What would happen if your birds strayed into your neighbour's yard, or your neighbour's dogs strayed into your yard?

There are no by-laws regarding keeping chickens in the Darwin, Palmerston, Litchfield, Katherine, Tennant Creek or Alice Springs area.

The NT Department of Health is responsible for public health nuisance complaints regarding odour and noise.

Sourcing poultry

- Purchase chickens from a reliable source
- Avoid buying birds from a variety of sources as this can increase the risk of introducing disease
- Rearing young chicks requires time and proper equipment; if you are starting a flock for the first time consider purchasing point of lay pullets (16-24 weeks old).

Transport

There are no permits or documents required for moving birds into or within the NT, however you must comply with the Land Transport Standards, available at www.australiananimalwelfare.com.au

Housing

Raising chickens in the tropics needs some special planning. The ideal set up in the Top End is to enclose birds in a secure run, with a shed for roosting and protection from wet weather.

- The shed should be large enough for all the birds to shelter from the weather and roost at night. The floor of the shed may be raised so it stays dry in wet weather. Make sure you can close the shed at night to protect the birds from predators.
- The run fence should be at least 3 metres high, and made from sturdy mesh. Smaller gauge mesh may also be buried around the bottom of the perimeter to deter dogs, cats and snakes. Consider enclosing the run with mesh to exclude wild birds which may carry diseases.
- Nesting boxes and perches should be provided in the shed.

For more information on designing your poultry house visit our website.

Do you have a PIC?

Properties with poultry must be registered with a Property Identification Code (PIC), so that properties can be located quickly in the event of a disease being detected.

Registration is free and can be completed online at www.nt.gov.au/industry/agriculture/livestock/get-a-property-identification-code

Feeding

A quality ready-mixed feed is the easiest way to ensure your birds receive adequate vitamins, minerals and protein.

Stage	Age	Feed	Amount
Chicks	1 day to 6 weeks	Chicken starter feed	Around 50g per bird per day
Pullets	6 - 18 weeks	Grower/finisher pellet	Around 95g per bird per day
Laying hens	Over 18 weeks	Layer pellet	Around 130g per bird per day

Overfeeding is unlikely to be a problem in our warmer climate, so ensure birds have continuous access to feed.

- To prevent waste and deter wild birds, use a tube feeder.
- Never use mouldy or rotten feeds.
- Provide shell-grit for laying hens.
- Make sure chick and pullet feeds contain an added coccidiostat, which will slow the growth of coccidian parasites so they can build immunity without getting sick. Never feed coccidiostats to laying hens due to withholding periods.

Always provide access to cool, clean water, and clean the water containers regularly.

Scraps

Feed household scraps with care, as rotten scraps can be a source for botulism disease. Only feed scraps which will be eaten by the flock within 10 minutes and do not feed:

Decomposing material or maggots, meat or bones, tea leaves, coffee grounds, citrus fruits, onion, rhubarb, orange, banana or raw potato peels.

Health care

Vaccination

There is no standard vaccination program for backyard chickens. Vaccination for Newcastle Disease is not compulsory in the NT. For further information contact your veterinarian.

Internal parasites

Tapeworms and roundworms can make chickens susceptible to other diseases. To limit worms:

- clean up dark, damp places where worms can survive
- routinely de-worm your flock every 3 months.

Wormers are available from stock feed and pet shops or veterinary clinics, and are usually added to the water source. Make sure you follow the label instructions, including withholding periods, carefully.

External parasites

Lice and mites can affect chickens, causing skin irritation and scaly, thickened legs. A type of worm which can infect the eyes of chickens is also found in the Top End. Contact your vet for treatment advice if you suspect parasites in your flock.

Common diseases in the Top End

A healthy chicken will be alert, active, eat often and have clean eyes and nostrils. Breathing should be silent.

Signs of a sick chicken include drooping wings, discharge from the nostrils or eyes, weakness, paralysis, lethargy or birds that are not eating.

Observing your flock regularly will help you to learn what is normal.

Botulism

Botulism is a common cause of death of poultry in the Top End. A bacteria commonly found in rotting material produces a potent toxin which is concentrated in maggots and can cause paralysis and death if eaten. There is no treatment for botulism, however you can help prevent the disease by removing rotting food scraps and carcasses, preventing access to decomposing garden waste, and regularly cleaning water containers.

Coccidiosis

Caused by an internal parasite which damages the birds' gastrointestinal tract, coccidiosis results in bloody droppings and occasionally sudden death. Young chickens are commonly affected, as adults build immunity to the parasite by past exposure. Young birds should always be fed a feed containing a coccidiostat to keep exposure to a level which builds immunity but does not cause illness.

Poisonous plants

Plants which are poisonous to poultry and should be removed include:

Oleander, Avocado, Potato
Rape, kale, turnip (*Brassica species*)
Thornapple (*Datura ferox*)
Castor oil plant (*Ricinus communis*)
Rattlepod (*crotalaria sp.*)

Egg laying problems

There are several egg laying disorders of hens. Generally only a single bird out of the flock will be affected in these cases, and it is important to contact your local vet for treatment advice. These problems can occur more commonly as birds become older, so consider replacing your flock for egg production. Hens may also go 'off lay' during times of stress including storms or very hot weather.



Egg safety

If you are going to sell eggs you need to obtain registration as a food business and comply with guidelines set by the Department of Health.

When producing eggs for private consumption:

- Clean dirt and faecal material with a dry brush.
- Throw away cracked or very dirty eggs.
- Refrigerate eggs immediately, placing them below any cooked or ready to eat foods in the fridge.
- Consider testing your soil for organochlorines, which may have been used to treat chicken houses and other old structures before 1984.

Also remember that any treatment you use in your flock has the potential to be passed into the eggs they produce. Drugs for use in poultry including medicated feed and over the counter wormers will have meat and egg withholding periods (WHP). The WHP is the length of time for which you should not eat the meat or eggs, or feed the eggs to other animals. Ask your vet for advice on WHPs.

Further information on egg safety can be found at www.health.nt.gov.au/Environmental_Health/Food_Safety/index.aspx

Restricted animal material

Poultry feed and litter is classed as restricted animal material (RAM) and **must never** be fed to ruminants (eg. cattle, goats or sheep) under the Australian Ruminant Feed Ban. This ban is in place to protect Australia from the potential spread of mad cow disease.



For treatment advice, contact your local veterinarian

Vet: _____

Clinic: _____

Phone: _____

Report any unexpected deaths or unusual disease signs in your chickens to the Regional Veterinary Officer.

Darwin 8999 2035

Katherine 8973 9716

Alice Springs 8951 8181

Or contact the Emergency Animal Disease hotline on 1800 675 888 (available 24 hours).